

Questions and Requests

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1. It has been suggested by some linguists (e.g. Ross (1970: footnote 19), Gordon and Lakoff (1971)) that pairs of sentences such as (1) and (2) below are syntactically derived from the same logical structure.

- (1) Where is John?
- (2) Tell me where John is.

Under such an analysis, both (1) and (2) would be derived from a structure something like: (REQUEST, I, you (TELL, you, me, (BE, John, Where))).¹ In the derivation of (1), the rule deleting the performative predicate REQUEST would be followed by a rule deleting TELL and effecting subject-verb inversion. The import of such a claim is that (1) and (2) have the same illocutionary force, (1) being in effect an elliptical form of (2). The purpose of this paper is to show that (1) and (2) are not equivalent in their structure as speech acts. I will argue that formal and pragmatic properties require that we recognize questions as a distinct category of speech acts, not as a subcategory of requests.

An alternative proposal for analyzing the performative structure of questions vis-à-vis requests is presented in Sadock (1972, 1974). Sadock rejects the idea that the performative predicate ASK can be reduced to the complex predicate REQUEST-TELL. He argues that true questions (that is, information-seeking questions) have the illocutionary force of asking, while what he calls requestions have the separate illocutionary force of requesting to tell. According to Sadock (1972: 337), 'The main distinguishing characteristic is that in the requestion, the speaker is only interested in the act of telling but in the true question, the speaker is interested in the content of the answer'. Sadock's analysis makes all sentences such as (1) above ambiguous between these two possible illocutionary forces. However, I find the evidence for this distinction unconvincing. A further goal of this paper, therefore, will be to show that interrogative structures in English have unambiguously the illocutionary force of an atomic predicate ASK.

To simplify the discussion, I will ignore the problem of the 'rhetorical question' and its relationship to acts of questioning that are genuine attempts to elicit information. Example sentences will be treated as if they belonged to a context which did not imply their answer before the addressee had had a chance to reply.

2. There are two problems in deciding whether the underlying structure of (1) is the same as that of (2). The first is determining whether the element TELL is present in the structure of (1), and the second is deciding whether REQUEST is an adequate representation of the illocutionary force of both (1) and (2).

The absence of TELL is demonstrated by the impossibility of continuing (1) with any adverb or adverbial clause referring to TELL. Thus, (2a) and (3a) below are unacceptable because of their 'dangling adverbials', whereas (2b) and (3b) are well formed.

- (2) a. *Where is John tomorrow?
b. Tell me where John is tomorrow./Tell me tomorrow...
- (3) a. *Where is John, so that Mary will believe you're smart.
b. Tell me where John is, so that Mary will believe you're smart.

In true cases of verb deletion, it is still possible for adverbs to refer to them. Consider, for example, (4a) and (4b).

- (4) a. John lives to play tennis, and George to swim.
b. John arrived at seven, and George at seven-thirty.

The presence of 'deleted verbs' in the logical structures of (4a) and (4b) is plausible because these deletions are recoverable. The proposed deletion in (1) is not.

Another argument against the presence of TELL in the underlying structure of (1) concerns the surface verb ask. If ask could be decomposed as REQUEST-TELL, we would expect that the negation of ask would have ambiguous scope. This is not the case, as (5a)-(5c) show. (5a) corresponds in meaning to (5b) alone, and not to (5c).

- (5) a. I'm not asking you where John is.
b. I'm not requesting that you tell me where John is.
c. I'm requesting that you not tell me where John is.

The paraphrase relations among (5a)-(5c) indicate that although ask as a unit can be paraphrased by a construction containing request-tell, the two constructions do not have equivalent internal structure.

3. The fact that questions and requests do not have the same illocutionary force can be demonstrated in several ways. First, they cannot be conjoined by and. (6a), which contains a question conjoined with a request, is ill formed, although (6b), where both members of the conjunction clearly have the same illocutionary force, is acceptable.

- (6) a. ?Where is John, and hand me the phone-book.
b. Tell me where John is, and hand me the phone-book.

Note that when a request is conjoined with an assertion, as in (6c), the result is also ill formed.

- (6) c. *Tell me where John is, and I met his sister last night.

In a conjunction of this type, the illocutionary force of each member must be the same. This provides strong evidence that questions and requests are not the same category of speech act.

Another reason for considering the force of asking to be different from that of requesting concerns the distribution of the politeness marker please. With requests, please is an extremely weak politeness device. Its occurrence is often so automatic and perfunctory that it need not sound odd or highly sarcastic even with inherently rude requests, such as 'Shut up, please'. The perfunctoriness of please extends to requests to tell, so that a sentence like 'Tell me where John is, please' does not require any special contextual factor to make it appropriate. With a question, however, the appropriateness of please is considerably more restricted. With information-seeking questions, please is relatively strong as a politeness device, signalling a social distance (frequently deferential) between speaker and addressee. For example, 'Where is John, please?' would not be used in conversation between two close friends, but it might be used by someone initiating conversation with a stranger. Sadock (1974:121) attributes the use of please with questions to the fact that 'the asker has no personal stake in the response'. But there are many situations in which please is likely to accompany a question, although it would be absurd to suppose that the questioner is feigning disinterest in the answer. For example, one might say to a salesclerk, 'How much does that one cost, please?', or to a stranger over the telephone, 'Is so-and-so there, please?', or to someone at an information booth, 'Where is the wash-room, please?'. The factors influencing the use of please in these cases include the impersonality of the social relationship, the desire to express a formal gesture of good will, and the uncertainty of the speaker that his addressee will cooperate conversationally with him. These aspects of please will be discussed in more detail below. At this point, I want only to establish that the interpretation of please is different with questions than with requests, and that this difference indicates a difference in the category of speech act.

Since a major argument for Sadock's question/requestion distinction is the supposed occurrence of please with requestions but not questions, it should be apparent how the foregoing refutes such a position. Two other arguments from Sadock require some comment. Sadock (1974:122) points out that expressions like in the world, in the hell, and so on 'in one common dialect can follow interrogative pronouns just in case the speaker is interested in the further specification of that noun phrase'. This means that sentences like 'Where in the world is John?' can be used only as questions and not as requestions, according to Sadock's definition of these terms. Moreover, in the world cannot co-occur with please, which is said to occur only with requestions.

I find the data in this argument confusing. Sadock seems to be saying that this use of in the world is distinct from its use to indicate exasperation or related emotions. That is, in the world can merely express curiosity, without a further connotation of tension because the speaker feels that his curiosity has been thus far thwarted. Even so, there is no problem in the tendency for such expressions to exclude please, since the expression of a personal feeling of curiosity is pragmatically incompatible with the goal of distancing the addressee. These co-occurrence restrictions show that lexical insertion is sensitive to a wide range of situational conditions. They do not show that the sentence 'Where in the world is John?' has a different illocutionary force from 'Where is John, please?'.

A further argument from Sadock is as follows. He points out that on a quiz show, a sentence like (7a) can be used with the same force as the question in (7b).

- (7) a. This ungainly-looking bird is the symbol of
Louisiana.
b. What ungainly-looking bird is the symbol of
Louisiana?

The point of this example is obscure. Obviously, the context of a quiz show supplies an implicit instruction to the addressee to give the name of the bird, having heard (7a). However, (7a) conveys this meaning in much the same way that an assertion like 'It's cold in here' conveys a request to close the window, given the right situational assumptions. The conveyed meaning depends upon special conditions that are unrelated to the basic structure of the speech act. In other words, the 'question' sense of (7a) is a perlocutionary effect, not a true indirect speech act.

To return to the central problem of questions and requests, there is a third reason for considering these as distinct categories of speech acts. The reason is that many idiomatic meanings attach themselves to questions, but not to the corresponding requests to tell. For example, in addition to its literal meaning as a question about the state of someone's knowledge, (8a) can convey the embedded question 'Where is John?', or it can convey an offer to tell about where John is (i.e. it can initiate a new topic in a conversation).² As a paraphrase, (8b) corresponds only to the literal meaning of (8a).

- (8) a. Do you know where John is?
b. Tell me if you know where John is.³

Similarly, (9a) can ask a question about someone's ability, or it can convey a request to close the window. (9b) paraphrases only the first, the literal, meaning of (9a).

- (9) a. Can you close the window?
b. Tell me if you can close the window.

If (8a) and (9a) were derived from the same source as (8b) and (9b) respectively, it would be necessary to say that the idiomatic meanings enter in the course of the derivation, after the application of the rule deleting tell. Obviously, this is unacceptable, because it would mean that the meaning of an utterance, including its illocutionary force, is not fully represented in its deep structure. Alternatively, the rule deleting tell could be constrained to apply obligatorily in the presence of certain idiomatic meanings. This solution provides nothing more than an ad hoc label for an unsolved problem. Recognizing that questions have an illocutionary force of their own seems to me the necessary first step toward accounting for the possible illocutionary extensions of their use, extensions which do not apply to paraphrases beginning 'Tell me...'.

4. Without presuming to give a complete or philosophical account of questions, I would like to add here a few comments on the structure of questions as a speech act type, and how they differ systematically from requests. These comments should point, in turn, toward an explanation of the formal differences which have just been described.

The crucial difference between questions and requests lies in a rather obvious fact, namely, a request mentions explicitly what action the speaker intends as an appropriate response to his speech act, whereas a question conveys implicitly what constitutes the appropriate next move by the addressee. This means that the range of response types that can be elicited by a request is indefinitely large, but the range of response types to questions is quite small and inflexible. A request can directly elicit virtually any action describable by language, including various kinds of speech acts. A question, however, directly elicits only its answer, which most often will be an act of asserting, although it can also be an act of showing (for example, pointing a finger).

The flexibility of request structures shows up, for example, in the possibility of embedding a request for some action within a request to pursue some larger goal, to which the action is instrumental. For example, (10) is primarily a request to let the speaker die happy,

(10) Tell me where John is so that I can die happy.

and only secondarily (or rather, instrumentally), a request to tell something. On the other hand, it is possible to make a primary request to tell, while mentioning in addition the best possible means, as in (11).

(11) Tell me where John is, by wriggling your ears in his direction.

(cf.: Wriggle your ears in John's direction, so that I'll know where he is.)

None of this flexibility is available within the structure of a question, as the unacceptable sentences below show.

(10) a. *Where is John, so that I can die happy?

(11) a. *Where is John, by wriggling your ears in his direction?

It is not possible to add to the instructions implicitly attached to a question within the structure of the question itself. A request, in contrast, is not circumscribed by any set of appropriate responses that are understood prior to the act of requesting itself.

Another way in which this difference shows up is that questions reject time adverbials, but requests do not. For example,

- (12) Five minutes from now, tell me where John is.
a. *Five minutes from now, where is John?
- (13) After I wash the dishes, tell me where John is.
a. *After I wash the dishes, where is John?

The response to a request may be explicitly deferred by the speaker, because there is no standardized expectation concerning the appropriate time lapse between uptake of the request and action in response to it. In fact, no such standardized expectation based upon the speech act is possible, because the appropriate time lapse will depend strictly on the content of the request. In most conversational settings,⁴ however, the answer to a question is expected immediately following uptake. In fact, answering is the normal sign of uptake; any response other than something that constitutes 'an answer' is a conversational non sequiter. If a speaker intends the answer to be deferred, he must explain this intention in an additional sentence. Otherwise, he will be understood as expecting some sort of reply as soon as his question has been asked.

A further difference between questions and requests is that there is a distinct set of rules concerning when it is permissible to make a request, who may make one, which request-form is appropriate to a given situation, and so on; but the rules concerning when to ask a question are simply the rules concerning when to engage in conversation. As long as someone is willing to engage in cooperative conversation, then it will be understood that he is prepared to ask and answer questions.⁵ Please is used with questions precisely when this willingness to cooperate conversationally is in doubt--for example, when initiating a conversation with a stranger. Please shows that the speaker does not intend to impose his attention on the addressee without his consent. As soon as a conversational rapport has been established, please becomes superfluous and its presence can only imply a lack of confidence in the other's good faith.

In contrast to this, please is always appropriate with requests, because it is never understood on general conversational principles that the addressee will comply. There is always an implicit option within the structure of requesting to accept or decline.⁶ This shows up in the fact that in reply to a request like 'Tell me where John is', all of the following are possible: 'Yes (I will)', 'O.K.', 'All right', 'No', 'Never'. These particles refer to the speaker's willingness to comply. The corresponding sequences with a question, however, are nonsensical. For example: *'Where is John? Never.'. Thus, yes and no have a potential ambiguity with requests which does not exist with questions. In reply to the request, 'Tell me if John is in Halifax' yes or no can mean either 'Yes, I will', 'No, I won't',

or 'Yes, he is', 'No, he isn't', respectively. This ambiguity does not exist in reply to the question 'Is John in Halifax?'. Yes and no in this case can only mean 'Yes, he is' and 'No, he isn't', respectively.

5. In conclusion, I have argued in this paper that we must recognize questions and requests as distinct classes of speech acts. The syntactic evidence for this distinction centers on the absence of a verbal predicate tell in the logical structure of questions, to which adverbs can refer; the impossibility of conjoining requests with questions; the specialized distribution of please with questions; and the existence of idiomatic meanings attached to questions, but not to the corresponding requests to tell. The question/request distinction is confirmed by the existence of general rules of conversation which govern (implicitly) the appropriate responses to questions, but not requests. Asking a question is different from making a request because the pattern of the interaction is understood independently of its content, and the basic pattern is correspondingly less flexible.

Footnotes

¹Such a representation would be assigned by supporters of the 'performative analysis'. This paper is not necessarily intended to support that theoretical view. What is at issue is whether questions constitute a distinct illocutionary class, or merely a subclass of requests. The further question concerning how information about the illocutionary force of a sentence is to be represented will not be touched upon here.

²These meanings are pointed out in Gordon and Lakoff (1971):

³For (8b) to correspond in meaning to (8a), the if-clause of (8b) must be interpreted as the nominalized complement of tell, not as an adverbial clause.

⁴'Most conversational settings' is intended to exclude fundamental questions like 'Will you marry me?', where it may be understood in the context that the addressee is allowed to think about his response.

⁵My notion of 'conversational cooperation' is, of course, that presented in Grice (1974).

Questions whose content violates cultural taboos (e.g. 'How old are you?') are obviously still excluded. The same constraint will hold for assertions, so that this fact is not related to the intrinsic structure of questioning.

⁶Orders are a special type of request characterized by the absence of this option. Even an order, however, invites the reply, 'Yes, sir' or 'Yes, ma'm', confirming the addressee's acceptance of the order. What is special about orders is the speaker and addressee's mutual realization that the reply 'No, sir' or 'No, ma'm', is socially unacceptable (i.e. not a genuine option).

References

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